

chau  
1pp/~~inter-sti-nex~~

June 16, Sunday, 1996:

[In talking to Chau today, I made the point that I saw the US role in Vietnam as essentially the same as that of the French, the Japanese, the Chinese. (He said, "Of course").

Talking to Chau, I was thinking of an aspect that I'm not sure I have reflected on before, certainly not when I was there: that the US was seen by all Vietnamese as a country that had aided, indeed provide the mainstay of, the French attempt to conquer their former colony from 1945-46-54. That could only fatally compromise the claims of the US to support "nationalism" and independence in Vietnam, South Vietnam or Vietnam, and the nationalistic claims of any Vietnamese who worked for or with the US. (We thought of ourselves as anti-colonial--without ever reconsidering that in the light of our support of the French--and it never occurred to us that our behavior would have fatally undermined that impression in the eyes of the Vietnamese and everyone else, however we might have been seen before 1945! (It was in 1945 that Ho Chi Minh himself adopted the terms of the US Declaration of Independence, partly in hopes of winning US support against the French or at least US neutrality, neither achieved!) I.e., we continued to see ourselves, and to imagine that others saw us, as might have been appropriate (and indeed was the case for Ho Chi Minh!) before, but not after, our eight-year support for the French and even pressure on them to pursue their/our war, which we had in effect made our own, an allied effort.

Even if the post-1954 policy were seen by us as having different (anti-Communist, pro-democracy) motives, and as being waged without the albatross of alliance with the French, we ignored that we ourselves had been tainted with the French brush in the previous eight years, a taint hardly to be overcome.

Chau made the point in particular that although Diem himself was both anti-Communist and nationalist, the US encouraged him to keep in place the entire government apparatus that had served the French in their fight against Vietnamese independence, and even persisted in referring to these collaborators as "nationalists" and "patriots," whereas the nationalists, Communist or not, had all fought or at least opposed the French. This was fatal to efforts at "national-building" or "pacification."

I made the point to him that all USG (and GVN) discussions of national-building and pacification at the time had ignored the question of whether or not this effort was being shaped, dominated, directed by foreigners and those employed by or working with foreigners.

Pacification concepts, in particular, had evolved almost entirely in the context of French and other projects of colonialist domination. That is why they ignored this distinction; it didn't even exist for the originators of the concepts.

Our discussions ignored this history, and proceeded as if the concepts and practices were directly suited to the "consolidation of governmental authority over regions infected by bandits, or subject to "indirect aggression" from outside the borders, or "subversion, rebellion, insurgency." Are any of the latter terms appropriate to resistance to foreign occupation or foreign domination? Counterinsurgency might better have been described as Repression-of-The-Resistance (to occupation, invasion, domination by foreigners).

We theorized and acted as if we were not foreigners in Vietnam; and to compound the irony, we acted and thought as if "North Vietnamese" were foreigners in "South Vietnam," and indeed as if Communists were foreigners in either part. (Vietnamese could be described as foreigners in Cambodia and Laos, and as violating their sovereignty by their operations and influence: but so were we!)

Even on the false assumption that there were, in nationalist terms, two countries, we are this week addressing the fact that JFK was inserting over a thousand Vietnamese into North Vietnam as early as his first month in office in 1961.

Chau says, from his experience in his own family, that many non-Communist nationalists joined the Communist leadership and cause, from 1946 on, only because the US was supporting the French, and it therefore seemed necessary to have the support of the Chinese and Soviets on the basis of Communist leadership. If the US had simply refrained from supporting the French, he believes that many--he himself, and perhaps his brothers, especially by 1950--would have rallied to other nationalist leadership against the French, rather than ally with the Communists. In 1945, he says, out of a million Vietnamese there were perhaps 50 to 100 Communists. It was US support of France that threw the weight of anti-French nationalism behind the Communists! (I commented that this was a totally unfamiliar assertion to me, and very interesting).